

2 July 1965

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Status of the Wheelus Air Base

1. The Libyan Government is not now applying any pressure on the US to evacuate Wheelus Air Base before our treaty rights expire in 1971. This situation probably will continue in the immediate future, but any sudden change in Libya, such as the King's death, could quickly alter the picture.

2. King Idris has made it clear to his ministers that he wants the US to remain at Wheelus at least until the expiration of our lease and perhaps longer. The King is the linch-pin of Libyan politics. When he makes his wishes known, his government acquiesces.

3. At the opening of Parliament last May, the government made an innocuous statement that negotiations concerning Wheelus were "proceeding satisfactorily." In fact there have been no substantive formal discussions since last summer. A technical subcommittee has also not met for several months. The government has told legislators not to raise the Wheelus question in debate, and has also muzzled the press on this subject.

4. Nevertheless, among residents of nearby Tripoli and other urban centers there remains a strong undercurrent of dissatisfaction with the "imperialist presence" in Libya. The US and several other Western consulates at Benghazi in eastern Libya have recently been bombed, and an oilfield in the eastern province of Cyrenaica was sabotaged. Given a suitable spark, the latent discontent could easily lead to riots like those of January 1964. The government might then panic and press the King to change his mind about Wheelus.

5. Something of this sort happened early last year following Nasir's public attack on Western presence in Libya. For over a year now he has been silent about

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Wheelus, largely due to US pressure. At the same time he has taken several swipes at the British presence. Should Nasir reopen the attack on the US, the government might then feel obliged to show that it was really pressing the US to leave.

6. The King's health poses another problem. He is a frail 74 now. There is certainly no assurance that he will last to 1971, much less beyond that date. When he goes, all bets are off regarding Wheelus and the Libyan political situation in general.

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